

## General Comments on Numbers

### What's in a name?

English	Greek	Hebrew
Genesis	genesis "beginning"	bereshiet "In the beginning"
Exodus	exodos "the road out"	shemot "These are the names"
Leviticus	leuitikon "of the Levites"	vayikra "Now he called"
Numbers	arithmoi "number"	bemidbar "In the wilderness"
Deut.	deuteronomion "words"	debarim "These are the words"

### Numbers should be called "In the Wilderness"

This isn't a boring story about an ancient Israelite census.

Israel in the wilderness is stripped of all preceding notions of culture, and is rebuilt as a new Israelite culture shaped by the Lord. The desert has nothing man-made. It is the opportunity for the Lord to rebuild, reshape, reorder this group of people as His own people with their own culture, doctrine and theology.

They have left Egypt and are going to Canaan and need to be turned into a different people. The Lord's order is there is no social inequality: everyone eats and drinks the same thing, everyone lives in a tent, and everything revolves around the Temple. The Lord's goal is to create a people where all are equal and all are His. The Lord's intent is also to make it clear nobody gets a pass. Anyone who sins is held to account, no one is spared. There are no "second class citizens" in Israel.

### Practical Application of Theology

The idea of "God is no respecter of persons", introduced in Lev. 19:15 and reinforced in Deut. 1:17, is very publicly enacted in the middle portion of this book (ch. 11-25), where the rebellious are punished and the zealous are rewarded, particularly the Levites.

God visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation is put into context when the Lord refuses to allow the current generation into the Promised Land (cf. 14:18 and 14:28-33).

Unfortunately, this process takes 40 years instead of 4 weeks, because of the rebellion of the people.

We are our own worst enemy. When things are bad, we should look to ourselves for the source, and not blame God.

## **Rhetorical Connection with Book of Mormon**

We see a similar pattern in the opening chapters of the Book of Mormon when Lehi and his family leave Jerusalem and move "into the wilderness". Lehi has two sons Jacob and Joseph and in his farewell to them, he explicitly draws parallels between the ancient account of Numbers and their personal experiences (cf. 2 Ne 2:1-4, note in v. 1 Lehi says to Jacob "tribulations in the wilderness").

The narrative in first Nephi where Lehi's family is fractured over leaving Jerusalem, with Laman and Lemuel not wanting to leave and the rest of them seeing they need to leave is similar to the story of Numbers. Lehi's family has to leave and they have to change their way of life drastically to move to the Promised Land in the New World.

### **So what's with the numbering?**

There are two census accounts given in the book, one at the beginning in ch. 1 and then one at ch. 26, which is after the 40 years wandering when all of the rebellious first generation of Israel have died out. The intent is to show the changes in population with respect to that first generation. How did the demographics change by tribe?

Think about how this would have affected people on the ground, families counting up who is there and who is not. It forces every adult family member to account for the changes in their family over the past 40 years. This is a deeply personal way to force an accounting of what has transpired.

More important, the census isn't just a population count. It is effectively the Israelite version of the draft. It is the counting of men old enough to bear weapons in war. The initial draft was not put into action. The second draft is put into action, because they are about to go into Canaan, under Joshua's leadership.

### **Summary of Numbers**

First Section - Camp at Sinai - Order

- 1 First census (military draft), duties of Levites
- 2 Arranging the camps around the Tabernacle
- 3-4 Lord takes Levites as His and tasks them
- 5 Keeping the camp clean, no lepers, no sinners, no jealousy
- 6 Nazirite vow, all Israel can be holy
- 7 Offerings from each tribe
- 8 Seven lampstands, purification of Levites
- 9 Passover observed, cloud over the Tabernacle
- 10 Silver trumpets for communication, tribes leave Sinai

## Second Section - Rebellion and Punishment - Chaos

- 11 Rebellion 1 of 8 - People complain, fed quail; Moses complains, gets help
- 12 Rebellion 2 of 8 - Miriam and Aaron complain, Miriam gets leprosy
- 13 Twelve spies, ten versus two
- 14 Rebellion 3 of 8 - People attempt to manipulate Moses, fail twice
- 15 Rules on Sacrifices, Sabbath observance and tassels
- 16-17 Rebellions 4 & 5 of 8 - Korah and the Levites, only Aaron's staff grows
- 18 Levites as guardians
- 19 Pollutions and cleansing
- 20 Rebellion 6 of 8 - Moses strikes the rock twice
- 21 Rebellion 7 of 8 - Serpents
- 22-24 Balaam and Balaak, Lord blesses Israel with protection from enemies, despite their intransigence
- 25 Rebellion 8 of 8 - Moabite women introduce Baal Peor, Phineas acts

## Third Section - Into the Land of Promise - Order

- 26 Second census, first generation gone
- 27 Inheritance to daughters in absence of sons, Joshua to succeed Moses
- 28-29 High holy days sacrifices
- 30 Laws concerning vows
- 31 First battle at Midian and division of loot
- 32 Reuben and Gad try to back out, Moses forbids, they commit
- 33 Review of travels, Lord warns to annihilate current inhabitants
- 34 Dividing the land by Tribe
- 35 Cities for Levites, and cities of refuge
- 36 Inheritance of daughters not to be transferred by marriage